

Ballroom Dance Tempi

Version 3.1

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1 Speed, Tempi, measures per minute and beats per minute

Tempo is the musical term for speed. In the social dance context, it is common to simply refer to the speed of the music, but musicians will habitually refer to the tempo of the music and dance competition rules also prefer this term.

Tempi is the plural of tempo, though the word ‘tempos’ is also in use.

The tempi of dance music is stated in measures per minute (mpm) or bars per minute (bpm). In music theory, the terms bar and measure are synonyms, the latter term being more common in North America. By convention, the tempo is rounded to the nearest whole number.

However, musicians usually measure tempo in beats per minute, since measure/bars per minute rounded to a whole number doesn’t give sufficient accuracy for their purposes. As a dancer, you wouldn’t need to know this, if not for one complication. Musicians abbreviate beats per minute to bpm. That is, depending on context, bpm could mean *bars* per minute or *beats* per minute. So, if you are trying to find a nice waltz around about 30 bars per minute, and you see a piece described as “90 bpm”, you need to realise the tempo was probably written by a musician and it’s 90 *beats* per minute, which is equivalent to 30 *bars* per minute.

To convert bars per minute to beats per minute, multiply by 3 for waltzes, 2 for Samba and Paso Doble, and 4 for the other listed dances. If you ever want to sit a dance theory exam, you also need to know that Tangos are usually scripted in 2/4 rather than 4/4.

2 Sources of disagreement

There is much difference of opinion on the correct tempo for most ballroom dances. The major causes of disagreement include the following.

- “Official” tempi are only prescribed for the purposes of competitions and formal dance exams. The vast bulk of dancers have no interest in dancing in a competition or taking exams, so the official tempi are irrelevant. Social dancers have their own preferred speed and do not care if this is not competition speed. Those organising social dances pay more attention to their customers preferences than to the official tempi. This is perfectly reasonable – social dances are not competitions.
- For some dances, the official tempi are beyond the ability of all but competition dancers, so you will never hear the official tempi being used at social dances. This disparity is greatest for jive. Socials typically include at least a few jives around 33-35 mpm, well short of the official 44 mpm. It is also common for social Viennese Waltzes to be slower than competition speed.
- Social dances where most customers are chronologically advantaged may deliberately adopt slower tempi than typical socials.

Anyone suggesting that social tempi are in some way less valid than competition tempi needs to be reminded that the social dance fraternity is much larger than the competition fraternity! Hence the table given later does include typical tempi encountered at socials.

However, this document does aim to also summarise the official tempi, and there is also variation in the official tempi. The following factors contribute to this.

- Some countries have two or more organisations running national ballroom dance competitions and/or conducting ballroom exams. These organisation may use different tempi, so a country may have several ‘official’ tempi.
- There are also disparities by country, though it seems there is considerable agreement on the set of tempi for international competitions.
- Dancers’ preferences may change over time and the official tempi may be adjusted to reflect this.
- When tempi are changed, different organisations may adopt different implementation dates. Alternatively, it may be that they some do agree on implementation dates, but that they don’t revise the tempi listed on their web sites, thus giving the incorrect impression that some organisations are staying with the old tempi while others have moved to the new tempi.
- There are many amateur web sites which list dance tempi. These sometimes show significant disparities to the official tempi. Most of these sites do not quote a source, so it is unclear whether the tempi are the site author’s personal social preference or whether they are based on some official source.
- Some web sites have included some spectacular typographical errors, such as incorrectly labelling a tempo in beats per minute as measures per minute.
- Most American style dances are performed at a difference tempo to the corresponding International style dance. Some North American web sites may state a tempo for a dance without clarifying whether the International or American version was intended. Anyone who is unaware that two different styles exist is likely to try to apply the quoted tempo to the only style they know, which may not be the style that was intended. (More information on the distinction between International and American Styles is available in the guide ‘Classification of Ballroom Dances.’)

3 The Data

The table below summarises data from all the official sources I could locate.

A common difficulty is that most web sites do not identify an effective date for the tempi.

The background colouring indicates where different organisations agree on the tempo of a dance.

When comparing International and American styles, it is interesting to note that not even the relative tempi of dances are preserved. In International Latin American Cha Cha is faster than Rumba, but in American Rhythm this may be reversed or they may be at the same tempo, depending on which source you believe.

Tempi in Measures per Minute

	1. Social	2a. IDSF 2003-2006	2b. IDSF 1997-2001	3. WDDSC	4. ISTD	5. USISTD	6a. USAD	6b. USABDA	7a. NDCA Pro/Am; Bronze	7b. NDCA Pro&Am; Other
Internat. Standard										
Waltz	28-30	28-30	30	30		28-31	28-30	30	28-30	30
Tango	28-30	31-33	33	33		30-32	31-33	33	32	32
Viennese Waltz	50-55	58-60	60	58-60		52-58	58-60	60	56-58	56-58
Foxtrot	28-30	28-30	30	30		28-30	28-30	30	28-30	28-30
Quickstep	46-50	50-52	50	50		48-52	50-52	50	48-52	48-52
Internat. Latin American										
Samba	48-50	50-52	50	50	50		50-52	50	48-50	50
Cha Cha	28-30	30-32	30	30	30		30-32	30	31	31
Rumba	24-27	25-27	27	27	27		25-27	27	27	26
Paso Doble		60-62	62	62	62		60-62	62	60-62	60-62
Jive	33-40	42-44	44	44	44		42-44	44	44-46	44
American Smooth										
Waltz						28-32	28-30	28-30	30-32	28-30
Tango						28-30	30-32	30-32	30-32	30
Viennese Waltz						50-54	54	54	54	54
Foxtrot						30-34	30-32	30-32	32-34	30
Peabody						60-62	60-62	60-62	60-62	60-62
American Rhythm										
Rumba						28-32	32-36	32-36	32-36	32
Cha Cha						28-32	30	30	30	30
Samba							52	52	52	52
Paso Doble							58-60	58-60	58-60	58-60
Mambo						48-51	47-51	47-51	48-51	47
(East Coast) Swing						34-36	34-36	34-36	34-36	36
West Coast Swing							28-32	28-32	28-32	28-32
Bolero						24-26	24-26	24-26	24-26	24
Meringue							29-32	29-32	29-32	29-32
Polka							60-62	60-62	60-62	60-62
Hustle							28-30	28-30	28-30	28-30

4 Sources

1	Based on speeds timed at socials in Sydney, Australia. Treat as very approximate.
2a	<p>“IDSF Competition Rules – Status: AGM Wels, 11th June 2006” http://www.idsf.net/dancesport_competitions/idsf_competition_rules_2006.doc at 11 March 2007.</p> <p>“IDSF Competition Rules – Status: Prague, 12th June 2005”. www.idsf.net/dancesport_competitions/idsf_comp_rules_2005.doc at 11 March 2007.</p> <p>“IDSF Competition Rules – Status: Barcelona, 7th July 2003”. www.idsf.net/idsf_comp_rules_barcelona_2003.pdf. at 10 May 2004.</p> <p>See Rule 5.11.</p>
2b	<p>“IDSF Competition Rules – Status: Lausanne, 3rd June 2001”. daga.dir.bg/corules.html at 10 May 2004.</p> <p>“IDSF Competition Rules – Status: Bratislava, 22nd May 1999. www.wudao.org/idsf004a.htm at 10 May 2004.</p> <p>“Official IDSF Competition Rules – Status: Paris 8th June 1997”. www.solaris.ru/clients/dsalr/rules-en.html at 10 May 2004.</p>
3	World Dance and Dance Sport Council – “WD&DSC Competition Rules” No clear date. www.wddsc.com/granted-titles/rules/music/index08e8.htm at 11 May 2004. Still active and unchanged at 11 March 2007.
4	The Imperial Society of Teachers of Dancing (ISTD) Latin American books. 6 th Edition. Dates ranging over 1998 – 2003.
5	The United States Imperial Society of Teachers of Dance. www.usistd.org/syllabi_step_lists_&_tempi/ at 11 May 2004.
6a	‘USA Dance Rulebook 2007-2008.’ USA Dance. http://usabda.org/dancesport_competitors/rules-policies-bylaws/dancesport_rulebook/index.cfm
6b	‘USA Dancesport Rulebook 2002 – 2003.’ The United States Amateur Ballroom Dancers Association (USABDA) web site. http://usabda.org/dancesport_competitors/rules-policies-bylaws/dancesport_rulebook/index.cfm at 10 May 2004. Rule 3.5 lists tempi.
7	‘General rules governing NDCA sanctioned competitions and championships’. National Dance Council of America. http://www.ndca.org/information/rules/rules_pdfs/Rulebook_Master.pdf at 9 April 2007.

In general, National DanceSport sites have not been listed. The few that list tempi do so by reference to the IDSF competition rules cited above. However, the USA version has been listed (item 6 above) since it also specifies tempi for American style that don’t appear in the IDSF rules.

5 History

Version 1.0	30 May 2004	Initial Release
Version 2.0	16 June 2004	Additional information concerning tango time signatures..
Version 2.1	14 Feb 2005	Updated source URL for this document.
Version 2.2	13 Aug 2006	Minor wording clarifications.
Version 3.0	9 Apr 2007	Added some new North American data. Removed commentary that was only of interest to musicians, since feedback received indicated that it confused most readers. This will be moved to a separate guide.
Version 3.1	7 Jul 2007	Minor wording clarifications. Some new data for Paso Doble.